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Rilleaux Family

Rillieux

'Old Pirate' began career in French army

Born in Pascagoula in 1740, Vincent Rillieux was the son of Francois Rillieux and Marie Marguerite Chenet. Called the "Old Pirate" he began a brilliant career in the French Army at an early age.

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soon as the English were near enough Rillieux and his men fired upon them and uttered loud shouts. The English, thinking that a large force was opposed to them, ran below deck and Rillieux and his 13 men made prisoners of about 70 British soldiers and sailors.

Besides his home in New Orleans where he built and lived in the old building that is now Brennan's Restaurant, Rillieux lived in Mobile, Pascagoula, Biloxi and owned most of the land in the Pearl River Basin.

Francois Rillieux

Founder of the Rillieux family in Louisiana, he was born in France in 1698.

He married Marie Marguarite Chenet, became a Captain in the French Army and came to New Orleans in 1720 aboard the ship "La Driade" with six other passengers.

In the early 1720's, he acquired land in New Orleans, Mobile, Biloxi and Pascagoula, where he was one of eleven landowners on the Pascagoula River in 1726.

In 1740, he was living in Pascagoula where his son, Vincent, was born.

In 1738, he was living at Fort Conde in Mobile.

It is supposed that Captain Rillieux died in a hunting accident in Biloxi about 1760, although this is not certain.

Archie Quinn Gautier
Collection

Vincent Rillieux

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Besides his home in New Orleans where he built and lived in the old building that is now Brennan's Restaurant, Rillieux lived in Mobile, Pascagoula, Biloxi and owned most of the land in the Pearl River Basin. His great-granddaughter became the Duchess of Rochefort and his great-grandson was the French painter, Degas. He died in New Orleans on February 10, 1800.

rative amble of the structure. Worse, not much could have been done credibly to cure it.

All the troubles begin, obviously, with Merchant-Ivory, who chose the material. They quite obviously elected to do *Jefferson In Paris* because of the alleged affair with Sally Hemings. Now, they can prate all they like about Picasso as the artist of the century: they chose him because he was a demonic lover. And they relied on Hopkins to bring it off. But all three have stranded one another.

What a lovely idea. A documentary about Al Hirschfeld. Susan W. Dryfoos has done it splendidly; and what's more, she has come up with a terrific title—**The Line King** (Castle Hill). Dryfoos, I assume, is of the Ochs-Sulzberger-Dryfoos family; she is an experienced documentary maker who heads a group devoted to historical data of *The New York Times*. Hirschfeld is a pretty important *Times* datum: for many decades, his delightful caricatures of theater and film people every Sunday have been much more memorable than most of the theater events they dealt with. Many of the people he has drawn—Zero Mostel, Carol Channing, Josephine Baker, dozens and dozens—seem more truly themselves in their Hirschfeld versions.

Dryfoos skillfully spins elements of

Hirschfeld's life and work together, along with bright vignettes of his friends, affections, aversions, crochets and pleasures. And the score, arranged from lively Broadway show tunes, helps to keep things bouncing along.

Hirschfeld is now well into his 90s and has outlived some of the people we see in the film, including his (second) wife, the German-born actress Dolly Haas. Everyone we see speaks about Hirschfeld as his or her private property; but anything else, we feel, would be out of order. And we get to meet one of the best-known, least-glimpsed figures in contemporary culture, his daughter Nina. Hirschfeld explains how he began to work her name into his drawings when she was born and how he has (almost) never stopped. Sometimes the "Nina" is in the wrinkles in a sleeve or the folds in a skirt or in a shock of hair; but there are always more than one in every Hirschfeld drawing, and thousands search them out every week. I once wrote something about Hirschfeld for a German weekly and got several letters from German readers who count the Ninas.

Many art critics have taken Hirschfeld seriously—Adam Gopnik in this film, for instance. My favorite comment in the film, however, is by Jules Feiffer, who says that Al Hirschfeld is to drawing what Fred Astaire is to dancing. That does it. •

ture's revolutionary forces in 1804. He made a fortune in Louisiana cotton and married shrewdly into the prestigious Rillieux family.

Maria Rillieux Musson, Degas's maternal grandmother, died suddenly in 1819, at the age of 25. (Benjamin Latrobe, the great architect of the Capitol in Washington D.C. who was then working in New Orleans, wandered by chance into her funeral Mass at the St. Louis Cathedral. "The Church was filled with her friends," he noted, "each of whom carried a lighted taper, and the service was long & loud.") Grief-stricken, Germain took his children, including Célestine and her younger brother Michel, back to France to be educated. There Célestine married a young banker with Italian connections named Auguste Degas. They were married in 1832, when Célestine was 18. Her father's sale of a young slave girl in New Orleans (as Degas's biographer, Henri Loyrette, recently discovered) boosted Célestine's already respectable dowry. Meanwhile Célestine's brother, Michel Musson, returned to New Orleans in 1834, the year of Degas's birth, and quickly became a prominent figure in New Orleans commercial and political circles.

During the Civil War, when New Orleans was occupied by Union troops, Musson sent his wife and two of his daughters into exile in France, where they were received and entertained by their cousins in the Degas family. Impressed by the success of their American uncle, Degas's younger brothers, René and Achille, decided to try their luck in New Orleans as commission merchants during the decade after the Civil War. (War-ravaged New Orleans was no longer the land of promise that it had been during the 1840s, and even Musson's cotton business was hanging by a thread; but the Degas brothers were undaunted.) In a marriage of first cousins, René married Musson's daughter Estelle, whose first husband, a Confederate captain (and a nephew of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy), was killed in the war. Estelle and René were expecting a child in December of 1872, for which Edgar promised to serve as godfather.

On his arrival in New Orleans in 1872, Degas joined the large household—including René and his family—in Michel Musson's rented mansion on Esplanade, the main residential thoroughfare of the Creole section of the city. He split his time between the shabby-genteel neighborhoods near the old French Quarter, and the new commercial sector above Canal Street—the "American" sector—where his brothers and his uncle worked. From the start,

Art and miscegenation in New Orleans.

Degas and the "Black World"

BY CHRISTOPHER BENFEY

... the oft-encountered apparition of the dark sharer of his name ...

—George Washington Cable,
The Grandissimes (1880)

Despite its reputation for flamboyant misbehavior, the city of New Orleans yields its secrets grudgingly. The five-month sojourn in New Orleans of Edgar Degas—himself a notoriously secretive man—has always carried a particular fascination. The only major French painter of the Impressionist generation to travel to the United States and paint what he saw there, Degas declared his ambition to be *illustre et inconnu*, famous and unknown. And he was largely successful in this regard, much to the frustration of his biographers. Not many clues to Degas's hooded temperament have surfaced in New Orleans. Yet a major clue,

unknown and unsuspected by Degas scholars, emerges from a closer look at his American relatives, the Rillieux, who were an illustrious family. It is a tale involving genius, miscegenation and Confederate luminaries.

Degas arrived in New Orleans in late October, 1872—he was 38 at the time—to visit the American wing of his far-flung family. Though he seems the quintessential Parisian painter, Degas's ties to New Orleans were manifold and longstanding. His mother, Célestine Musson Degas, was a native New Orleansian—a "Creole," according to the then current meaning of a white descendant of French and Spanish settlers of the city. Her father, Germain Musson, was an adventurer who had fled the French colony of Saint-Domingue (later Haiti) after the triumph of Toussaint L'Ouver-

Degas was torn between his enthusiasm for American society and his nostalgia for Paris. "Everything is beautiful in this world of the people," he wrote to the painter James Tissot. "But one Paris laundry girl, with bare arms, is worth it all for such a pronounced Parisian as I am."

Degas admired (and invested in) the great Southern railroads rebuilt since the war, with the "marvellous invention" of the sleeping cars, "as long as at least two carriages in France." The Creole women, whom he considered (or pretended to consider) possible marriage partners, were "almost all pretty," he informed his friend Henri Rouart, "and many have even amidst their charms that touch of ugliness without which, no salvation."

Those charms are most evident in the portraits that Degas painted of his American cousins, the three daughters of Michel Musson. "All day long I am among these dear folk," he reported, "painting and drawing, making portraits of the family." Particularly haunting are the images of his pregnant sister-in-law Estelle, who had contracted ophthalmia and was quickly going blind. In the portrait of Estelle now hanging in the National Gallery in Washington, Degas placed his cousin on the chaise longue so familiar for portraits of elegant ladies—or courtesans—in repose. But he eschewed the luxurious conventions of the genre. Pushed to one side of the composition, perched awkwardly on the chaise, Estelle stares into a reddish haze that seems to constitute her inner world. (Degas was himself having trouble with his eyes, and he had particular sympathy for his sister-in-law's plight.)

Degas's New Orleans paintings showed, perhaps inadvertently, the Creole love of luxury even as their social status was slipping: the elegant musical soirées in the living room, with René at the piano (*The Singing Lesson*, at Dumbarton Oaks, in Washington); the visit of a pedicurist, tending to a young girl's toes (in the Musée D'Orsay). What particularly fascinated Degas, however, was the large black population of New Orleans. Again and again in his letters from the city, Degas returns to the omnipresence of black people and the fact of

racial mixing.

Nothing pleases me more than the black women of all shades, holding little white children, so very white, in their arms, against white houses with columns of fluted wood and in gardens of orange trees, and ladies in muslin against the fronts of their little houses, and the steamboats with twin funnels as tall as factory smokestacks, and fruit vendors with stores filled to overflowing, and the contrast between the bustle and efficiency of offices with this vast dark animal force, etc., etc. And the pretty pure-blooded women and the pretty quadroons and the strapping black women!

Degas's contrast between efficient white offices and the black work force—he witnessed the latter along the water-

could be reading the bad news. The precarious choreography of the painting may allude to that fact. Musson himself seems to be slipping, literally out of the lower edge of the picture. With its intense blacks and whites, the painting is like a photographic negative: the black suits represent the power of these white men, while the gleaming white cotton spread out on the table implies, as Brown notes, the labor of the invisible black work force.

Despite his fascination with blacks Degas only painted one image of a black person among the fifteen or so paintings he began in New Orleans the almost effaced nurse in the sketch like *Children on a Doorstep* (New Orleans, in the Ordrupgaard in Copenhagen).

In his final letter from New Orleans, written just before his departure in early March 1873, Degas regretted not having done more with the subject of race: "The black world, I have not the time to explore it; there are some real treasures as regards drawing and color in these forests of ebony. I shall be very surprised to live among white people only in Paris. And then I love silhouettes so much and these silhouettes walk."

Of course there are many reasons why Degas might have neglected the "black world." His eyes were bothering him and he avoided the bright Louisiana light along the river and near the

French market, where black "subjects" might be found. He suggested that such well-known painters of blacks as Biard and Manet would have done a better job in New Orleans. Still, for a master of artifice such as Degas, who spread his coat on the studio floor to simulate a beach scene, staying inside wasn't necessarily a hindrance. And as he noted, there were many black servants in the Musson house, all of them presumably available to sit for portraits. Is it possible, then, that there was some inhibition at work in Degas's reluctance to paint these black people, a submerged awareness that the "walking silhouettes" were closer to him than he wished to admit?

Degas's great-grandfather, Vincent Rilleux, fought for the Spanish king during the Louisiana phase of the American Revolution. Don Vicenze's exploits as a



EDGAR DEGAS, *CHILDREN ON A DOORSTEP (NEW ORLEANS)*, 1872

front, where the muscular "roustabouts" unloaded cotton from steamboats—has an obvious bearing on his great painting, *A Cotton Office in New Orleans* (in the Municipal Museum in Pau, in southwestern France). Degas depicted fourteen men in Musson's cotton brokerage firm, including his brothers Achille and René, his uncle Michel Musson, and his cousin by marriage, William Bell. One of the great representations of modern business life, this painting is also a family portrait, packed with private meanings.

The Musson cotton firm, a victim of Reconstruction policies and the worldwide depression of 1873, had just collapsed, as Marilyn Brown—whose documentation of Degas's sojourn in New Orleans is indispensable—recently discovered. René, holding a copy of the *Picayune* in the center of the painting,

Courtesy Ole Woldbye, Copenhagen

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clever naval captain are granted a paragraph or so in histories of Louisiana. With a crew of fourteen Creoles, he once captured an English transport and—as his men shouted uproariously to suggest a much larger force—took prisoner the fifty-six soldiers it was carrying. He built a large house on Royal Street in 1795 (currently occupied by Brennan's Restaurant), and there he raised his daughters and two sons, one of whom, Michael, died young.

A closely guarded secret of the Rillieux family—a secret kept until now—was that Vincent Rillieux's other son, also called Vincent, had a longstanding relationship with a free woman of color called Constance Vivant. One of their sons, Norbert Rillieux, became a leading chemical engineer of his time whose inventions revolutionized the sugar industry throughout the world. Another son, Edmond, was a prominent businessman who served for a time as superintendent of the city water works. Norbert and Edmond Rillieux were first cousins of Degas's mother and of his uncle Michel Musson. While it was not unusual for Creole men of wealth to have quadroon mistresses, it is perhaps more surprising that Degas's close relation with someone as significant as Norbert Rillieux should have been overlooked for so long.

The birth record in the City Hall of New Orleans reads: "Norbert Rillieux, quadroon libre, natural son of Vincent Rillieux and Constance Vivant. Born March 17, 1806. Baptized in St. Louis Cathedral by Père Antoine." Norbert and his mother belonged to the large caste of "free people of color"—intermediate in rights and for the most part skin color between slaves and whites—that made New Orleans unlike any other city in the South. The free quadroon and octoroon women—so fascinating to New Orleans writers from George Washington Cable to Faulkner—were reputed to be of extraordinary beauty, and often met their white protectors at special "quadroon balls" arranged for that purpose. (Such terms as "quadroon" and "octoroon"—one-quarter and one-eighth African ancestry, respectively—had semi-legal status in pre-war New Orleans, but official records often blur the distinctions.)

Visiting the city in 1834, the English novelist and social critic Harriet Martineau was shocked by how widespread such practices were: "The quadroon connections in New Orleans are all but universal, as I was assured on the spot by ladies who cannot be mistaken." Sometimes the men went on to marry white women of their own class, making vari-

ous provisions for their parallel families. "But many others," as Frederick Law Olmsted noted during a New Orleans visit during the 1850s, "form so strong attachments, that the arrangement is never discontinued, but becomes, indeed, that of marriage, except that it is not legalized or solemnized." Such seems to have been the case with Vincent Rillieux (who remained unmarried) and Constance Vivant.

The children of such alliances struck many observers as suffering a particularly poignant fate. Olmsted spoke of the alienation of "the class composed of the illegitimate offspring of white men and colored women (mulattos or quadroons), who, from habits of early life, the advantages of education, and the use of wealth, are too much superior to the negroes, in general, to associate with them, and are not allowed by law, or the popular prejudice, to marry white people." "The quadroon girls of New Orleans are brought up by their mothers," Martineau reported, "to be what they [i.e., the mothers] have been, the mistresses of white gentlemen. The boys are some of them sent to France."

As was Norbert Rillieux, at an early age. His father, Vincent, a wealthy engineer and inventor (and Edgar Degas's great-uncle), had designed a steam-

operated press for making bales of cotton; it was so successful that it was mentioned in obituaries at the time of his more distinguished son's death. Norbert also showed an unusual aptitude for engineering, the reason perhaps why his father sent him to Paris to be educated. By 1830, at the age of 24, the precocious Norbert was an instructor in applied mechanics at the École Centrale in Paris, publishing a series of well-regarded papers on steam engines and steam power.

And then, in the early 1830s, Norbert Rillieux made an extraordinary discovery, one that transformed the sugar-refining process. Traditionally, sugarcane juice was reduced by a primitive and wasteful procedure called the "Jamaica Train," which required the tedious and back-breaking toil of many slaves, who, armed with long ladles, skimmed the boiling juice from one open, steaming kettle to the next. Various attempts had been made, with vacuum pans and horizontal coils, to harness the energy of the hot vapors rising from the boiling juice. "It remained for Rillieux," as the sugar expert George P. Meade, in a pioneering article on Rillieux first published in 1946, noted, "by a stroke of genius, to enclose the condensing coils in a vacuum chamber [which lowered

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the boiling point of the liquid] and to employ the vapor from this first condensing chamber for evaporating the juice in a second chamber under higher vacuum." Rillieux's cost-cutting innovation, comparable in its impact on the sugar industry to Eli Whitney's cotton gin, was the basis for all modern industrial evaporation.

Failing to interest the French in his invention, Rillieux found eager clients among the wealthy planters of his native Louisiana, where sugar plantations were booming during the 1830s. In 1833 he was invited back to New Orleans by the planter and banking representative Edmund Forstall to be chief engineer of a sugar refinery that Forstall was constructing in the city. But Norbert's father, Vincent, had quarreled with Edmund Forstall (records give no cause for the quarrel) and Norbert backed out of the arrangement. He was evidently on good terms with his father, who died the same year, in 1833. According to the obituary in the *New Orleans Bee*, Vincent Rillieux Jr. died of a stroke; other family records state that he died in a duel.

As Rillieux continued to perfect his apparatus, he made a fortune speculating in land, and lost it in the nationwide financial collapse of 1837. Success came in 1843 when two planters, Judah P. Benjamin and Theodore Packwood, hired Rillieux to install an evaporator on Benjamin's Bellechasse Plantation. In a competition three years later, prizes for best sugar were awarded to Benjamin and Packwood, who were cited for having used "Rillieux's patent sugar boiling apparatus."

The remarkable Judah P. Benjamin, the Jewish Confederate luminary who later served as Jefferson Davis's secretary of war ("the brains of the Confederacy," he was sometimes called), became Rillieux's major supporter in Louisiana sugar circles, defending the Rillieux apparatus in a series of widely distributed articles in *De Bow's* popular commercial magazine. Benjamin wrote in 1846 that the sugar made by the Rillieux method was the best in Louisiana, its "crystalline grain and snowy whiteness ... equal to those of the best double-refined sugar of our northern refineries"—already some North-South friction there. Soon the Rillieux system was also being used in Cuba and Mexico.

The irony that Benjamin, an apologist for Southern interests in Washington, became a spokesman for a technique that reduced the need for slave labor, and required skilled (and presumably

non-slave) operators, was pointed out to him ten years later on the Senate floor, when Benjamin was a U.S. senator (and the first Jew in the United States Senate) for Louisiana. During a debate on slavery and Cuban annexation in 1859, Senator Dixon of Connecticut produced a copy of *De Bow's Review* and confronted Benjamin with his own admission of the inefficiency of slave labor. On the debate about slaves and sugar manufacture, Edmund Forstall also weighed in, agreeing with Benjamin that slaves could not be entrusted with the complex Rillieux apparatus. Neither planter acknowledged, as the historian John Haitmann has pointed out, the obvious irony that the inventor was himself de-



EDGAR DEGAS IN NEW ORLEANS, 1872-73

scended from slaves.

Judah P. Benjamin's friendship with Norbert Rillieux was evidently a close one, an unconventional intimacy unencumbered by domestic arrangements. The spectacular failure of Benjamin's marriage to a Creole belle from New Orleans, who took their daughter and moved to Paris, was known to everyone in the South. Norbert Rillieux was a frequent guest at Benjamin's "bachelors' quarters" on Polymnia Street in New Orleans. Benjamin's earliest biographer reported that "frequently, for quite long visits, came the dried-up little chemist, Rillieux, always the centre of an admiring and interested group of planters from the neighborhood as he explained this or that point in the chemistry of sugar or the working of his apparatus."

This remarkable pair, the great Jewish lawyer and the brilliant free man of color, might have posed for one of Degas's famous double portraits, where the contrasts of the subjects are as important as the similarities. Each had overcome extraordinary obstacles, and a mutually beneficial symbiosis developed between them. Benjamin, born on the island of Saint Croix in the British West Indies and raised poor on the Charleston waterfront, had arrived in New Orleans with \$5 in his pocket after being expelled from Yale under a cloud of suspicion. Determined to achieve the status—unheard of for a Jew—of wealthy planter and landowner (not to mention slaveowner: his plantation had 140 slaves), Benjamin used the apparatus of the free man of color to produce "snow-white" sugar, his pass into the ranks of the landed gentry. In return, the grateful Benjamin, instead of hoarding his lucrative secret, advertised Rillieux's name and genius across the slave-holding South.

For ten years at least, Rillieux was a key figure in New Orleans manufacturing, according to one contemporary "the most sought-after engineer in Louisiana." But he was still, by Louisiana law, a "person of color." We don't know how Rillieux responded to race prejudice while in America. He couldn't be lodged in the "big house" at the plantations he visited, including Benjamin's Bellechasse, and one source claims he was housed in the slave quarters. It seems more likely that his patrons provided special housing for him. The son of one of these recalled that his father placed Rillieux in a special house with slave servants when Rillieux visited as a consultant.

As an engineer, Rillieux was interested in more things than sugar. He applied himself to the problem of drainage of the lowlands, one of the perennial problems in New Orleans, and reportedly came up with a workable plan, which he presented to a group of investors headed by Laurent Millaudon. Rillieux's plan, according to Horsin-Déon, his French secretary and partner, was blocked in the state legislature by none other than Edmund Forstall, Rillieux's "sworn enemy." Charles Rousseve (in his book *The Negro in Louisiana*, which appeared in 1937) claims that the plan was a sewer system for the city—a successful sewer system was not installed until many years after the Civil War. According to Rousseve, "local authorities refused to accept" Rillieux's proposal because "sentiment against free people of color had become

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sufficiently acute to prohibit the bestowing of such an honor upon a member of this group."

We don't know exactly when Rillieux returned to France. He had many reasons, including the new restrictions imposed in 1855 on free people of color in New Orleans. Men like Rillieux were not allowed to move about the streets without permission, nor could they visit the city without first presenting the guarantee of a white sponsor. There was also a steep decline in the sugar industry during the Civil War. Horsin-Déon says that Rillieux left America "after the war, exhausted and asking for nothing but rest," but other sources refer to his presence in Paris as early as 1861.

Back in Paris, Rillieux became passionately interested in Egypt, perhaps after constructing a sugar refinery there. Duncan Kenner, a Louisiana sugar planter and noted horse breeder—famous for his secret mission late in the Civil War, when he proposed, in Jefferson Davis's name, an exchange of emancipation of Southern slaves for European recognition of the Confederacy—visited Rillieux in 1880 and was surprised to find the old man deciphering hieroglyphics at the Bibliothèque Nationale. When Rillieux was nearly 75, he "returned from the pyramids," as one French commentator remarked, and made further refinements in various devices for the production of cane and beet sugar.

Rillieux was often described as a "*caractère difficile*," a gruff and plainspoken man who did not suffer fools gladly. A colleague in Paris mentioned Rillieux's criticisms of his rivals as "formulated with a vivacity quite in character with the irritable inventor." A fine photograph taken in Paris during Rillieux's later years shows an imposing, light-skinned figure with forceful hands and intense features. He is dressed formally in a frock-coat and wears a full white beard.

Norbert Rillieux died when he was 89, and was buried in the great cemetery of Père Lachaise, with the inscription, *Ici reposent Norbert Rillieux ingénieur civil à la Nouvelle Orleans 18 Mars 1806/ décédé à Paris le 8 Octobre 1894/ Emily Cuckow, Veuve Rillieux 1827-1912*. Of his widow nothing is known.

Did Edgar Degas know of his mother's first cousin Norbert Rillieux? It hardly seems likely that he did not. Even if we assume that the Musson-Degas family did not speak openly of Norbert Rillieux, out of embarrassment at miscegenation so close to home, the network of New Orleans families with French connections was so profoundly interrelated that it is reasonable to

assume that the name would have been mentioned among them. Two of Rillieux's major patrons, Judah Benjamin and Duncan Kenner, were well known to the Musson family. (Kenner had visited the Musson family in Paris when Célestine Musson Degas was pregnant with her first child, Edgar, and gone riding with Degas's uncle Henri Degas in Naples.) And Vincent Jr., Norbert's father, was hardly shunned. As late as 1873, the year Degas visited New Orleans, the prominent architect James Freret, whose grandmother was a Rillieux (a sister of Vincent Jr.), proudly proclaimed his kinship with Norbert's father, the designer of the innovative cotton press. And Norbert Rillieux was among the most famous New Orleansians in nineteenth-century France. Degas himself was fascinated by new inventions and industrial apparatus, and he socialized with such industrialists and entrepreneurs as his friend Henri Rouart. The Rillieux name would have been a familiar one in such circles. Indeed, if we assume that Degas was aware of Norbert Rillieux's achievements, the place to look for his ties to Norbert is perhaps not in his rare paintings of black subjects, but rather in the cousins' shared fascination with technology.

While in New Orleans, Degas wrote to Rouart about a new steam-powered streetcar designed by Emile Lamm, hired by the developer Laurent Millaudon. Millaudon was a friend of the Musson family and a patron, thirty years earlier, of Norbert Rillieux. "I shall bring you a description of this contraption," Degas promised Rouart. Not only did Degas stay abreast of the latest technological innovations, he was himself a technical innovator of genius, in his brilliant and much-noted use of peculiar points of view (as in the Cotton Office painting), unexpected croppings and off-center compositions, and in his improvisatory approach to the artist's materials: mixing paint with various thinners, experimenting with printing techniques, and so on. As Theodore Reff has noted, "there was in [Degas] something of the amateur scientist and inventor." It is this aspect of Degas, the restless and irritable experimenter with new techniques and subjects, which most resembles Rillieux.

Another context for the Rillieux name to be spoken in the Degas-Musson family arises from the fraught political scene in post-war New Orleans. Degas arrived just in time to witness the corrupt and contested state election of 1872, and stayed long enough for the first of several coup attempts that followed. The bitterness arising from the election—which placed

an African American interim governor, P.B.S. Pinchback, briefly in office—lasted for several years, culminating in the bloody confrontation of 1874 known as the "Battle of Liberty Place," when members of a white supremacist militia called the Crescent City White League fought with the integrated Metropolitan Police. Thirty people died, before federal troops called in by President Grant restored order.

The Musson family was deeply enmeshed in the very highest reaches of New Orleans politics. During the spring and summer of 1873, just after his nephew Edgar Degas's departure, Michel Musson was a leader in the "Unification Movement," an attempt to bring about cooperation between white and black businessmen (and, not so incidentally, to put an end to Reconstruction business practices thought to be unfair to whites). The movement was spearheaded by a "Committee of One Hundred," made up of fifty prominent whites (including Musson) and fifty blacks. The blacks were mostly former free men of color who also felt dispossessed by the Republican partnership of former slaves and white carpetbaggers, and among them was Edmond Rillieux, Norbert's younger brother. For Musson there must have been something uneasily literal about the idea of "Unification" as he looked across the room at his cousin and plotted the joining of their business interests.

When Unification failed to catch hold in the rest of Louisiana, many of its participants, including Musson, looked to more radical measures to "redeem" the state. It was Musson, as Marilyn Brown discovered, who presided over the White League's planning meeting, just before the Liberty Place battle, while his son-in-law William Bell (another inhabitant of the Esplanade house) served as treasurer for the White League. Bell's friend and business partner, General Fred N. Ogden, was the military commander of the White League militia.

These matters go unmentioned in Edgar Degas's letters, and yet he could hardly have been unaware of them. His was a family in which issues of race were part of the daily texture of life. With illustrious black cousins, in Paris and Louisiana, he could not have painted black faces in New Orleans as mere local scenery, aspects of an exotic landscape quite foreign to himself. Nor could he entirely anesthetize blacks, as "real treasures as regards drawing and color." One is tempted to interpret the effaced black nurse in *Children on a Doorstep* as symbolic of his own hesitations about the depiction of race.

That hesitation is given brilliant expression six years later in his painting of a circus performer. The novelist and critic Edmond de Goncourt had visited Degas in his studio in 1874, a year after Degas's return from New Orleans, and found him "an original fellow ... sickly, neurotic, and so ophthalmic that he is afraid of losing his sight." "Among all the artists I have met so far," Goncourt noted in his famous journal, "he is the one who has best been able, in representing modern life, to catch the spirit of that life." The painter and the critic remained in touch, and five years later Degas invited Goncourt back to his studio. "I will have my negress there," he promised. The woman in question was the famous mulatto circus performer

Miss La La, acrobat of the Cirque Fernando whom Degas painted towards the beginning of 1879. (The picture is in the National Gallery in London.) He depicted Miss La La being hoisted into the air by a rope held between her teeth. Part triumphant ascension, part violent wrenching (or lynching), her abrupt and precarious upward journey, viewed from below, possesses an unnerving ambivalence—a fitting response, perhaps, to one more ambiguity of "modern life."

What is beyond dispute is that from the descendants of Don Vicenze Rillieux, the resourceful sea captain, came a remarkable number of innovative minds, including his son Vincent Jr., inventor of a better cotton press, his grandson Nor-

bert, a much greater inventor on several fronts, and his great grandson Edgar Degas, one of the supreme inventors of modern painting. The American wing of Degas's family, especially the Rillieux branch, was far more interesting than has been thought, and was as significant historically as the motley crew of European nobility—the Bellellis, the Morbilli, and the rest—that has received the most attention from Degas's biographers. "Louisiana must be respected by all her children," Degas wrote Henri Rouart in December, 1872, "and I am almost one of them."

CHRISTOPHER BENFEY, who teaches at Mount Holyoke College, is completing a book about Degas in New Orleans.

What liberals don't like to say.

The Lost Children

BY JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN

I was a teenage mother—married, but a teenage mother just the same. I frequently encounter people who find this hard to believe. I am a university professor, and teenage motherhood doesn't belong in the orderly and secure world of higher education and its environs. The doubters are not entirely wrong, not even about the era I hail from, when unliberated young men and women "did the right thing" by combining marriage and sex. A good number of these marriages, after all, did not work out, though a remarkable number of them did.

According to Kristin Luker, I was a part of the real epidemic of teenage motherhood in modern American history. The real epidemic of teenage motherhood, you see, is the one that occurred when Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House, before the 1960s burst upon us all. In the 1950s, pregnancy was all the rage. The fact that it was preceded or accompanied by marriage seems a matter of little moment to Luker. Married teen mothers and unmarried teen mothers: for her, it is a distinction without a momentous difference. Luker does observe that society didn't run around having fits about teenage pregnancy in those days, because the kids were wed; but it is, in her view, a matter of diminished import. Today's "babies having babies" "are simply doing what such

'babies' did in the 1940s and 1950s, although they are more visible now than their counterparts were then." What troubles Luker is that today society is hysterical about the question, with Democrats and Republicans alike taking aim at the mothers in their teens. Teenage mothers are today's "scapegoats," wrongly and harshly accused of "selfishness." And there is also misogyny in the alarm about teenage pregnancy: since the subjects are women, "their lapses from 'good' behavior are seen as enormously threatening."

*Dubious Conceptions:
The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy*
by Kristin Luker
(Harvard University Press, 283 pp., \$24.95)

Never mind that the teenage pregnancy of our day is linked to extraordinary rates of illegitimacy; to high-school dropout rates that are unacceptably high; to dismal or difficult living conditions; to drug and alcohol abuse; and, of course, to more teenage childbearing. We know that the babies of teenage mothers are less likely to flourish than are babies born under more favorable circumstances. They tend to be low birth-weight babies and are less likely to have had adequate prenatal care. All

too often, abuse and neglect are malevolent companions on their harsh journey certainly by comparison to the prospect faced by children born into stable, two parent situations—the safest environment for children, considering the alternatives. This is the terrible picture that is warranted by the best available evidence. Yet Luker downplays the bleakness of this scenario. And there is a rather important figure in the growing drama of teenage motherhood that almost disappears in her discussion. It is that shadowy entity known as "the baby." In this book of 283 pages, there are approximately five pages devoted to the babies of unwed teen mothers. Luker acknowledges that the children of teenage mothers are more likely to have health problems, cognitive impairment and behavioral troubles. "Some studies suggest they may be more likely to be abused and neglected by their mothers"; and more children of teenage moms drop out of school or are "involved" with criminality. And yet she concludes that "the jury is still out on whether teenage parents make bad parents," shifting the entire discussion to the subject of parents.

On the subject of unwed mothers, however, the jury is definitely not out on the unhappy outcomes. Luker's analysis diverges significantly from the findings of a comprehensive report called